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Proper 22, Year B

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For something to be simple does not necessarily mean it is clear. Or perhaps it is the other way around... to be clear does not automatically mean simple. Discerning God's will is often a conundrum we struggle to resolve.

In the Gospel passage from Mark we have just heard, some wily Pharisees attempt to trick Jesus – the Gospel we hear says they were trying to “test” Jesus. A test usually assumes there is a right answer and, in this case, the Pharisees think they hold the key. But as he usually does, Jesus flusters them by turning the question around and asking for their answer. “What did Moses command you?”

Likewise for us. We might ask: What does Jesus command of us – what does the Gospel command of us? It tends to strike terror in our hearts to think that there is a hard and fast law governing divorce. After all, many of us have been. Or our children are, or our friends or neighbors are. At the very least, we hope for wiggle room for ourselves and those we love.

Frederick Buechner, a theologian who will mark the past century as very nearly his own, gives us some guidance on how we might navigate this rocky terrain. He reminds us, in his writing on the Law of Love, that above all other laws, there is one supreme law – and its two Great Commandments. We are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and

souls, and our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot do one without the other.

As an example, he gives Jesus' answer regarding healing on the Sabbath. One isn't to work on the Sabbath, but OF COURSE one should heal rather than preserve one's own piety. That is what the law of love would have us do – setting aside the lesser law to keep the greater law. In other words, to keep one law, one must break another... loving our neighbor is how we love God.

Legalism, always knowing the right answer and behaving accordingly, is a pretty appealing solution to an ethical dilemma. Look it up in the book and it is all clear. Jesus makes it even simpler – two commandments and you're done. Until, time and again, we try to figure out just how to go about doing it.

As Buechner points out – loving one's neighbor isn't just... liking them a lot. Loving God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch with God, and loving our neighbors means acting in their best interests no matter what, even if personally you can't stand them.

How does one judge a marriage? What has gone amiss? Which partner is more at fault? What will be the long-term results of splitting up – or staying together? And the children, if any – what will it be like to live in a home with constant battling or to be separated from one parent with feelings of rejection, guilt, and loss... Children always think it is their fault.

These are never, ever, easy things to consider, to solve. Those weighing divorce are keenly aware of these difficult considerations and they most often agonize over them. How does one best serve the spouse with whom you are miserable? There is no book, as Buechner says, to look up the absolute answers. Not even the Bible, which can illuminate, while not being a rule book. In the end, there is only your own heart and whatever by God's grace it has picked up in the way of insight, honesty, courage, humility.

On a Sunday, when we pray for those celebrating anniversaries, often our inward thought is "How on earth did you make it? – to thirty, forty, fifty years and more???" I remember a fellow church member, in 1993, congratulating my husband and me for making it ten years. I said, well, ten years is not really that long. It's nothing to sniff at, she said. A lot of couples don't make it that far. It is all too easy for those of us who are divorced to struggle with some measure of resentment or awe when others are acknowledged for making it for many years, if not "to the end."

Whether we have "made it" many years, or until death does us part, or have ended a heartbreaking marriage, there is a huge space for us to show God's compassion. A space for loving our neighbors as ourselves. By God's grace.